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ABSTRACT

A study examined family conflicts on the premise that conflict between siblings provides an opportunity for the socialization of justice. Forty two-parent, two-child families were observed in their homes during three 90-minute sessions in which the children and parents were in separate areas of the house. In each of the families, one child was 2.5 years old and the other was 4 to 5 years old. Observers recorded sibling interactions and parental interventions in sibling disputes, and found that parents were more likely to support the younger than the older sibling in sibling conflicts. It was also discovered, however, that when the seriousness of the transgression was taken into account, there was no difference between parents' support of older and younger children. Parents favored younger children because they are most often transgressed against. Parents tended to uphold certain "rules," such as those involving sharing, aggression, and property damage, more than others, such as those involving lies, tattling, disagreement, and bossiness. (MDM)

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Parents' interventions in sibling conflict: The administration of justice in the family

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(SRCD, 1993, New Orleans)

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Sibling disputes are frequent, emotional, involving, and most often about issues of rights and fairness. It is for these reasons that children's conflicts constitute important opportunities for parental intervention. Parents can help their children to resolve issues fairly--in accord with the principles they wish to foster in their children--and teach the importance of such principles for the resolution of disputes because children are themselves involved in the conflict issues. Experts disagree, however, on how parents should behave when faced with sibling conflict. Cogent arguments have been made justifying a variety of intervention and non-intervention strategies, and existing data do not consistently support a single view.

Dreikurs, in his 1964 classic, Children the Challenge, advocated that parents do nothing when faced with sibling conflicts. His theory was that one of the main goals of fighting children is to gain parental attention, and that any intervention provided the attainment of that goal. Brody and Stoneman similarly argue against interfering in children's conflicts as parents would then prevent their children from working out a solution on their own and acquiring conflict resolution skills. Vandell and Bailey concur, arguing that parents should intervene only in highly aggressive or destructive conflicts between their offspring. In support of these views, observational studies of family interaction have found that siblings fight more often when mothers are present than absent, and that family conflicts in which third parties intervene are longer than those that remain dyadic.

Richard Felson also advocates that parents refrain from intervention in the conflicts of their children, but for quite different reasons. He has argued that a balance of power forms between siblings who are left to their own devices in conflict. Parents, who typically support the younger, weaker party, encourage the younger to stand up to the older sibling, thus altering the balance of power that might typically develop in sibling relationships. By empowering the younger child, parental intervention could actually promote future conflict. Felson's data, which focused on the self-reports of preteen and college students, do support the view that parents are more likely to punish older than younger siblings for fighting and that children fight more often when older is more often punished. Problems with the retrospective nature of this data, and the possible over-represenatation of older siblings in the preteen sample limit the utility of this evidence, however. More recently, Gene Brody and his colleagues have found that in family discussions of sibling problems, parents favor younger, school-aged siblings over their older brothers or sisters. Moreover, such favoritism was related to the children's negative behavior with one another, both contemporaneously and one year later. None of these analyses take account of the context provided by the children's conflicts, however. We ask if younger siblings are more often supported because older siblings more often violate their rights?

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Other theorists contend that parents can play a constructive role with respect to their children's development of principles for the fair treatment of one another, and that such principles can help children to resolve disagreements with minimal conflict and violence. For example, Judy Dunn and Penny Munn observe that "the context of child hitting or teasing is one in which rules, feelings, and strategies of conciliation are likely to be addressed by mothers." Marilyn Ihinger has formalized the view that parents who consistently enforce a set of rules for their children's interactions will decrease the extent of both conflict among the children and of challenges to parental rules. Family norms of equity or fairness will develop, and children will learn about the rights of others, sharing, and reciprocity. Ihinger's model depends upon parents' consistency and decisiveness with respect to enforcing clear standards of behavior and direct examinations of parents' consistency in this context do not exist.

Our premise is that conflict between siblings provides an opportunity for the socialization of justice. We consider parental fairness, and do so from the children's perspective. We want to know how the children might reasonably interpret and understand what is right or fair, based on their parents' interventions or failures to intervene in their disputes. We emphasize the support that parents offer each of the disputants, as well as parents' support of potential principles for the resolution of conflict.

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Method

Our data comes from nine hours of observation in the homes of 40 families. Each family had two children, one who was two-and-a-half-years-old and one who was four-to-five-years-old, at the time of observation. Both parents participated in our study, with fathers, mothers and children being present for three 90-minute observation sessions and mothers and children being present during the remaining three sessions. As my current interest is in the messages children receive in the family, I will not differentiate between interventions by mothers and fathers here. An observer followed the children around the house and dictated a running account of their interaction and of parental behavior relevant to sibling interaction onto one track of a stereo tape recorder while a separate microphone enabled us to record the conversation of family members on the other track.

When conflicts were observed, we identified the issue of conflict in terms of contraventions of the potential rights or welfare of one child by the other child. These included physical aggression and verbal aggression, disagreement with sibling views, physical control and bossing, lying, nagging, tattling, interfering with a sibling's right to play alone, excluding the sibling from play, and a variety of property issues such as property damage, taking things that the sibling possessed or owned, and refusing to share. For each issue we noted who had contravened the rule and whether or not parents intervened, with each intervention being coded for which child and what principles parents supported or opposed. It was also possible for parents to intervene but to address issues other than the ones in which the children were embroiled. This might occur if a child first took a toy and then hit, and parental interventions that followed the hitting addressed only the property issue, or if parents responded to this conflict by telling the children that they should not play in the dining room. Children might reasonably conclude, in either case, that their parents were not concerned about physical aggression. Finally, we coded the family's resolution of each issue, whether parents had intervened or not, asking whether principles of justice were upheld when the issue was resolved. For example, parents might urge a child to return a toy to its owner, but if the child refused to do so, and if the conflict ended with the nonowner still in possession of the toy, the ownership rule was not upheld.

Results

Two findings emerge when we examine which child was supported by parents in their interventions. First, in accord with the literature to date, we found that parents were more likely to support the younger than the older sibling (Average frequency of support for Younger was 69; average frequency of support for Older was 49). Quite a different picture emerged when we also considered the children's violations of the rights and welfare of their siblings. The results were calculated in terms of ratios of parental support of each child in comparison with the transgressions of the sibling. We found no difference between parents' support of older and younger children, when the siblings' tendencies to violate the rights and welfare of their sisters or brothers were taken into account. The ratio of parents support of older relative to younger's transgression was .71 to 1: the ratio of support of youger relative to older's transgressions was .66 to 1.0. Thus, although we do replicate the finding of parental favoritism toward younger, it is accounted for by older's more frequent violation of youngers' rights and welfare. Moreover, parental intervention does not then serve the function of encouraging younger to initiate conflict or to respond aggressively to olders' initiations, as Felson proposed. Parents do not favor their younger children when they transgress, but favor younger children because they are most often transgressed against. The dynamics that Felson proposed do not describe the processes that we observed.

Our analyses of specific principles of justice within these families led us to identify three groups of rules. The first group of potential rules did not appear to be rules that parents supported or that were upheld by the outcome of disputes (Table 1). Each parental intervention was categorized as either supporting or opposing the rule contravened by the children. Our figure shows the proportion of violations and interventions in which parents either supported or opposed each principle. In the case of tattling, disagreeing with the views of the sibling, bossing, excluding a sibling from play, or lying to a sibling, parents were not more likely to support than to oppose the rule in their interventions. The only significant effect in this grouping was for parents to accept tattling more often than they enforced a rule that children shouldn't tattle.

Parents also intervened and addressed other issues, or failed to intervene at all. In the case of all of these potential rules, parents were more likely either to not intervene or to address other

issues than to address the issue of dispute. Finally, we looked at whether the outcome of the conflicts was consonant with the existence of a rule within the families: for this group there was no case in which conflict outcomes indicated the existence of a family rule. Whether parents intervened or not, conflicts did not end by upholding rules concerning tattling on, disagreeing with, bossing, excluding or lying to a sibling. Our conclusion is that the items included in this reasonable list of potential rules were not rules at all in these families.

The second group consists of rules that parents supported significantly more often than they opposed in their interventions (Table 2). These included rules that children not interfere with the activities of their siblings, that they not continue behavior that appears to nag their siblings, that they not control the behavior of their siblings physically, and that they refrain from verbal aggression such as name calling and insulting. While these principles were endorsed by the parents, in each case parents more often failed to intervene or intervened and addressed another issue rather than the issue at hand. Although these were principles that the parents did endorse, they may not have been important, given the rather low rate at which they were addressed. One might think that parents deliberately refrain from intervention, as Dreikurs and others suggest that they should, because these are issues that the children can work out on their own. We therefore asked whether the outcomes of the conflicts upheld each of these principles regardless of parental intervention. We found that to be the case only for interference; regardless of parental interventions, the rule that children should not interfere with their siblings' ongoing activity was upheld. For the other issues, parents allowed conflicts to end without support for principles that they endorsed when they addressed these issues in their interventions.

The final set of principles occupy a more prominent place (Table 3). These rules are endorsed by parents and addressed as often as not in parental interventions. This group consists of rules prohibiting physical aggression, and of all rules that have to do with property rights and the distribution of property in the family. Of all the potential rules, the one favouring sharing is the most strongly endorsed and the most frequently addressed. In this grouping the ownership rule is the only one supported both when parents intervene in their children's conflicts and when parents do not intervene. Rules related to sharing, property damage, and aggression, are also upheld, but only when parents do intervene.

Our overall findings are not consistent with past models of the dynamics of parental intervention. Contrary to Felson's argument, parents do not support their younger children indiscriminately. Rather, parents' support is related to children's contraventions of the rights of their siblings. Such support would not encourage younger siblings to become more aggressive. Ihinger's views are also not supported, although the evidence is less decisive. Ihinger states that children learn principles of justice when their parents are consistent and decisive in their enforcement of such principles. Following from this, we expected that issues on which parents interevene most often and most consistently would be most readily acquired and used by the children to settle disputes on their own. Thus sharing and physical aggression would be the ones that children themselves should utilize, but in our data, rules of ownership and interference were the only ones that were upheld when parents did not intervene. Following from Dreikurs, one might expect that it would be issues that least often elicited parents' interventions that would be resolved most often in a principled way by the children alone. Ownership clearly does not fall into that class, nor does interference stand out as particularly unlikely to elicit intervention. Longitudinal data will be needed to examine whether individual differences among families also fail to confirm existing models of the dynamics and implications of parental conflict interventions. In the meantime, our data suggest that new models will be needed that take more account of both conflict issues and of the ongoing interaction among combatants before advice can confidently be offered to parents faced with the complexities of their children's conflicts.

Table 1: Is it a rule?

	Proportion of time that parents				Outcome	
Rule	support	oppose	not address	no response	uphold	contravene
tattle	.12	.20	.47	.20	3.40	5.68
disagree	.05	.08	.11	.77	0.45	1.88
boss	.15	.13	.10	.61	5.65	7.85
exclude	.27	.22	.04	.48	2.20	4.55
lie	.23	.14	.30	.33	1.14	0.90

Table 2: Is it an important rule?

	Proportion of time that parents				Outcome	
Rule	support	oppose	not address	no response	uphold	contravene
interfere	.19	.11	.04	.68	4.35	2.28
nag	.28	.09	.07	.57	5.63	4.50
physical control	.25	.04	.10	.61	0.40	0.78
verbal aggression	.22	.04	.15	.59	2.55	6.35

Table 3: And the rest.

	Proportion of time that parents				Outcome	
Rule	support	oppose	not address	no response	uphold	contravene
ownership	.35	.18	.10	.38	3.13	1.40
possession	.28	.18	.11	.43	11.10	10.93
sharing	.63	.09	.08	.20	2.33	1.45
property damage	.40	.09	.11	.40	3.18	2.25
physical aggression	.43	.03	.10	.44	7.40	7.05